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WHAT THE BIBLE IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT.

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MEN were once so irreverent as to declare that God could make a revelation according to one method only. It must be an infallible revelation, infallibly received, recorded, preserved, transmitted, copied, translated, and interpreted. No one believes that now. We now see that, if a really true revelation ever came from God, we may be perfectly confident that the method employed by divine Providence to record and preserve it must be the right method, however different from our preconceived notions. It is equally self-evident that, if this book does contain a true revelation from God, it can never cease to be religiously authoritative. God can be trusted to take care of his own Word. It is said that, when Alexander was besieging Tyre, the people became so frightened lest the god of the city should desert it in its hour of need that they chained the idol to the temple altar. We do not need to attempt to chain the Bible to the old landmarks, nor Jehovah to the old theology. God will never let any theology be destroyed that is worth saving. Men of faith are men of fearlessness. When it was once proposed in parliament to prohibit Strauss' books in Prussia, it was the great orthodox theologian, Neander, who withstood the proposal. Similarly Dr. Martin Kähler, of Halle, in his *Unser Streit um die Bibel* (1895), cries out that suppression of investigation and suppression of public information is not the proper remedy for wrong thinking and wrong writing. Scientific refutation is the only effectual remedy. The more we honor the Bible, says he, the more willing we will be to have it criticised by learned men and the exact truth discovered.

This is God's lamp, and no man can ever put out any light which God has kindled. It is the light that is inspired, not the mere words by means of which this light is thrown on the path.

The words are human, but the words are only the lantern—the truth which they express is the light, and that is divine. No one thinks of the Pentateuch as the Mohammedan thinks of the Koran, believing it to have been handed down directly by the hand of God from heaven.¹ The Bible, even according to the most orthodox and conservative view, is not a charm, the words and letters of which possess some mysterious power. The Mohammedans still hang texts of the Koran about the necks of their children and donkeys to protect them from accident. At a late International Congress of Orientalists at Paris a multitude of Syriac charms were displayed, the efficacy of which (just as in ancient Assyria and Egypt) depended upon the use of supposedly sacred names, which were mostly mere gibberish to those who used them, but which they supposed had some supernatural power, if the right words could only be put in the right order. Orthodox Christianity has no belief analogous to that concerning the Bible.

What, then, is the Bible according to the orthodox view? The apostle Paul called the Bible which he possessed “holy scriptures,” “sacred writings.” Now, what is this sacred, holy element which makes the Bible what it is, without which it would not be the Bible to us? Is it any particular type, or paper, or binding, or verbal phraseology? No. And it is scarcely less ignorant for one to imagine that the binding and the pictures are a part of the Bible than to suppose that the titles of the books, or the headings of the chapters, or the chronology printed at the side of the pages, or the English translation or any other translation, or any particular *letters* or *words* (whether Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic), are the Bible, the sacred thing which Jesus and the apostles called the “oracles of God.” It is not the particular words, but *the thought*, which is the sacred thing, the Christian’s Bible. The way in which Jesus quoted the Old Testament ought to have taught us that long ago. If the thought be properly given, we are reading the holy oracles, whether they are written in the Revised Version or the King James Version, in Hebrew or Hindustani. The

¹ Cf. BIBLICAL WORLD, September, 1894, p. 208.

constitution of the United States remains authoritative in whatever language it is read. The Magna Charta of England is written in Latin, and the original copy is hidden away in the Museum; but any English farmer who can get a facsimile of it, or a correct translation or paraphrase of it, can say: "This is our Magna Charta; this is the basis of our liberties." It is just so with the Bible. It is not necessary to have the original manuscripts, but he who has a true copy, translation, or paraphrase possesses man's great charter of spiritual liberty.

The important question is not whether the orthography and grammar of our present text are infallibly inerrant, or whether it was originally written in perfect Greek or Hebrew by men so inspired that they could not spell a word wrong, nor make a slip of the pen in putting down a number, nor any mistake of interpretation or judgment in the use of ancient records. The question which concerns thinking people is whether the substantial contents—the thought and argument—are trustworthy or not. Those err, not knowing what the Bible is, who suppose that, unless inerrant penmanship and grammar, and infallible archæology, history, and arithmetic, and an absolutely perfect memory, were guaranteed to the holy men who wrote these records, we have lost our Bible! The Bible does not claim that. Intelligent orthodoxy does not claim it. What we do claim is that the agents through whom this revelation was given were honest and intelligent, and therefore that the record of events is true and reliable.

So far as the preservation of the text is concerned, no ancient classic can compare with it. Dr. Kenyon² says: "It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain." The number of manuscripts is so great and the quotations are so many that it is practically certain, according to this expert, that "the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or the other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world." So far as variations in the text are concerned, it has been well said that the most inaccurate text ever written leaves every great

² *The Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (1895).

doctrine and fact of Christendom untouched; while Professor König, one of the greatest text critics in the world, who gives 130 pages in his *Einleitung* (1893) to the discussion of how these variations arose, concludes that very few, if any, of them arose from any desire to change the text, which remains substantially as written, with the exception of accidental changes due to copyists, which could not have been avoided without a constant miracle.

Nor would the Bible—the sacred revelation of God's will to man—be in any way injured if it were proved that certain incidental scientific or historical references in the original manuscripts were not absolutely inerrant. Guizot, in his *History of France*, mentions that the Phœnicians began about 1100 B. C. to trade in Gaul, and that Euxenes, the Greek trader, landed there 600 B. C., and that the word "German" means "man of war." Now, if we can trace back the Phœnician trade to 1600 B. C., as I think we can, or prove that Euxenes came to Gaul in 599 B. C., and that the word "German" originally meant "neighbor," not "man of war," to how great an extent ought such trifling inaccuracies to affect Guizot's trustworthiness as a historian of France? So little that no critic has ever thought them worth mentioning. However careful and honest a historian may be, he must be expected to make some mistakes, unless he is omniscient. Critics have not destroyed the Bible when they have only proved the humanity of the writers of the Bible, and that inspiration did not protect them from all human infirmity. Whether inspiration did thus protect them, even in trifles, must be determined by the evidence alone. The value of this book as a true history and a true revelation does not depend upon the decision of that question.

Some people seem to think that, if it cannot be proved that every line of the Pentateuch came from the pen of Moses and every psalm from the pen of David, then the Bible is destroyed. That is not orthodoxy; it is religious hysteria. Our grandfathers knew that there were passages in the Pentateuch which Moses did not write. They knew that he did not write the account of his own death and burial, and they knew, too, that, if the Jewish

law-book had the same history as every other law-book, it was to be expected that to the old Mosaic legislation there would be added the new laws of a later period. The original legislator would naturally impress his name upon the whole body of laws. Blackstone's and Kent's *Commentaries*, and Story's *Equity Jurisprudence*, must always go by these great names, though much new matter has already been added to them. I think anyone acquainted with the facts would be struck with the application to the Hebrew law-book of the preface by Dr. Bigelow to the thirteenth edition of Story's great work mentioned above. He says: "In later editions a practice had grown up of making changes in the original text and notes in one way or another, generally by bracketed interpolations . . . [but] in process of time the brackets had sometimes moved into wrong places or dropped out altogether, and the result was that the work of the author could not always be distinguished from that of his editor. . . . In the present edition the original text and notes reappear intact, save the correction of some misprints."

Now, that exactly represents the attitude of modern critical scholars toward the Mosaic law-book. The surer one is that the basis and fundamental contents and spirit of those laws came directly from Moses himself, the more heartily ought one to encourage this work.

Just so with that marvelous Hebrew hymn-book of the temple which we possess. The Jews never supposed that every psalm came from David. Indeed, a number of different authors are mentioned in the headings of these psalms; and by a study of the vocabulary—some psalms showing a much later vocabulary than others—and the religious sentiment of the hymn, and its reference to the temple sacrifices or to the temple as destroyed, the approximate date, the circumstances under which it was written, and sometimes the probable authorship may be determined. This is precisely the same kind of work attempted recently with several denominational hymn-books, in the earlier editions of which the names of the authors were not always given, and, when added by later editors, not always given correctly; while in many instances there had been mutilations of

the text of even the best-known hymns. Such work does not destroy the religious value of the book, but increases it.

So that, after we have worked down to the correct text by the careful processes of textual criticism, even then we have not always reached the meaning—the sacred revelation—which the words were intended to convey. Sometimes the authorship of the passage may help to determine its meaning, but it is always important to know the age to which it belongs, its position in the religious development of the nation, the circumstances surrounding its composition, and whether the passage is prose or poetry, literal or figurative. The same words differ vitally in meaning in different forms of literature. A word or phrase which in a philosophic treatise or scientific essay means one thing may mean something quite different in an ordinary narrative or in a poem. The same phrase or figure of speech may take on an entirely new meaning in a different age, a different locality, and different surroundings. Therefore the inspired thought (the real Bible) can never be fully discovered without the aid of literary and historical criticism, *i. e.*, higher criticism. In the language of the street, the term “higher criticism” stands for any foolish and skeptical theory concerning the Bible; but that is merely the ordinary inaccuracy of street phraseology. The higher critical tests are simply finer tests than those which can be used in textual criticism, and Principal Cave, Professors Robertson and Kilpatrick, Drs. Green, Bissel, and Andrew Harper, Professors Delitzsch, Strack, and Orelli, have all reached their results professedly by the use of these higher critical methods.

It has been the application of these higher tests of literature and history which has made the Bible so entrancingly interesting in our time. This is a national literature; not a book, but a library; not a specimen of God's style, but the production of many authors widely divergent from each other in style as in knowledge. Here are fragments from royal pens, and long sections from the pens of the shepherd and swineherd. Here is a passage which claims to have been written by an Egyptian general, and another by a courtier of the Persian king Artaxerxes,

and another by a Greek scholar, and still another by a petty Roman official, and yet others by a tentmaker or some unlearned fishermen of Syria. Some of these chapters contain history so ancient that no other record in the world made mention of it until in our times the inscriptions on the banks of the Nile and the Euphrates have been placed by its side; while other chapters were written by contemporaries of Virgil and Horace and Tacitus, and contain notices of men who are mentioned again and again in the Greek and Roman classics. Here are chapters that were written in the center of Asia, and others on the coasts of Africa, and others from the capital of Europe. Here are fragments of songs which antedate by centuries the songs of Homer, and others of the days of Æschylus and Sappho and Sophocles, and others still which were written after Greek and Roman poetry of the best type had perished. Each one of these Bible authors has marked peculiarities of style, favorite words, phrases, symbols, and metaphors. Amos and Isaiah, Ezekiel and the Psalmist, Luke, John, and Paul, each writes in a style which is all his own. It is now seen, as never before, that we cannot talk of the Hebrew of the Old Testament or the Greek of the New Testament as if they were all of a piece; but one writer used Palestinian Hebrew, and another Babylonian Hebrew, and another Aramaic, *i. e.*, vulgar Hebrew or Hebraized Canaanitish; one New Testament writer uses excellent Greek, and another Hebraistic Greek, and they all are more or less influenced by the colloquial language of the district in which they live.

They also use their materials differently. Some of the New Testament authors never quote any authority except some former prophet or apostle, but Luke in his life of Christ used all former writings on the subject which he could get hold of, and the Hebrew scribes who wrote the Pentateuch, the Chronicles, and the Kings used various old books now lost.³ This proves that at least some of the Bible writers did use documentary materials in composing their works. Recent discoveries have shown that this use of earlier documents emphasizes, in some cases, instead of obliterates, their inspiration. We have now

³ Numb. 21 : 14 ; 1 Kings 11 : 41 ; 1 Chron. 29 : 2 ; 29 : 21 ; 2 Chron. 12 : 13 ; etc.

in our hands the literature of several of the other nations which lived nearest to the Hebrews, and in which they discuss the same subjects of which the Bible treats—the creation of the world and man, the nature of sin, the will of God, the duty of man, the future world. The difference between these accounts and the Bible account is more striking than their similarity. God has breathed upon these Hebrew writers. Their silence, *e. g.*, concerning the demons and monsters which, according to the contemporaneous Egyptian and Syrian texts, were universally supposed to attack every man who left this world at death, is as strange and noble as their positive utterances concerning the merciful and gracious one. It is now seen that the earliest stories in Genesis were not literal histories, but visions of spiritual truth expressed in the picture language which has always been so attractive to orientals. In such literature it becomes perfectly natural and beautiful to speak of a serpent talking or of God's voice walking in the garden. It must not be forgotten that these narratives were written by orientals, for orientals, in the usual oriental style.

A study of the symbolism which was well understood and used in common intercourse, not only by the Hebrews, but by the nations surrounding them, has thrown much new light upon many Bible passages, as, *e. g.*, when (as I think I have recently proved) the symbolic creatures which Ezekiel saw upholding God's chariot are shown by the new discoveries to have been closely related to the Babylonian pantheon. What a lesson for the captives at the Kebar when Anu and Nergal, with all their subordinates, are pictured as the obedient servants of Jehovah, the Lord of all!

Who these many writers were that wrote the Old Testament we do not know, nor do we know the exact date at which all of the books were written; but one thing we may be sure of—these documents were not written by dishonest men who have wilfully misrepresented the facts; and if they saw what they say they saw, and heard what they say they heard, the truth both of prophecy and of Christianity is established. Jesus is the vindication of Old Testament prophecy. If Jesus is a fact, then the

Bible is true, and Christianity is true even if there were more holy men of old who spake and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost than we have formerly known. This is God's lamp, whoever made the pieces of which it is composed, and whenever they were made. Whether these pieces were put together earlier or later than we have been accustomed to suppose, the combination was divinely ordered, as is seen by the light it gives. This is the one book that is a lamp to the feet and a light to the path. That is what the Bible is for, and no scholar today denies that it is that.

